

BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0383
DAVID LENT/ROME

MARCH 17, 1976

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS SCENESETTER

ANHC:

ITALY'S EMBATTLED CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS OPEN THEIR PARTY CONGRESS ON THURSDAY IN A SEARCH FOR WAYS TO HOLD ON TO POWER DESPITE THE GROWING STRENGTH OF THE COUNTRY'S COMMUNIST PARTY. FROM ROME, VOA'S DAVID LENT REPORTS.

VOICE:

ITALY'S CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS ARE AT A CROSSROADS. AFTER THIRTY YEARS OF DOMINATING THE POLITICAL SCENE IN ROME, THEY EITHER REFORM -- OR RISK SEE THEIR SHARE OF POLITICAL POWER CONTINUE TO SHRINK SO MUCH THAT THEY WILL HAVE TO GIVE THE COMMUNIST PARTY A ROLE IN GOVERNMENT. IN LAST JUNE'S ELECTIONS, THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS POLLED ONLY TWO PERCENT MORE OF THE VOTE THAN THE COMMUNISTS -- AND OPINION POLLS SHOW THAT THE EROSION OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC STRENGTH HAS NOT STOPPED.

THE POINT OF THE PARTY CONGRESS WHICH BEGINS THURSDAY AT THE PALAZZO DEI CONGRESSI ON ROME'S SOUTHERN OUTSKIRTS IS TO GIVE THE PARTY A NEW IMAGE -- TO BRING FORTH NEW FACES -- AND DEMONSTRATE TO THE VOTERS THAT THE PARTY CAN REFORM ITSELF.

THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S FUTURE COURSE IS LIKELY TO BE FASHIONED IN A STRUGGLE BETWEEN PROGRESSIVES AND CONSERVATIVES OVER THE PARTY'S SECRETARY, BENIGNO ZACCAGNINI. HE REPLACED THE CONSERVATIVE AMINTORE FANFANI LAST JULY FOLLOWING CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC SLIPPAGE IN THE JUNE ELECTIONS -- AND HAS DONE MUCH TO REFURBISH AND MODERNIZE THE PARTY'S IMAGE. CONSERVATIVES WOULD

LIKE TO REPLACE ZACCAGNINI WITH ARNALDO FORLANI -- A CENTRIST WHO IS CURRENTLY DEFENSE MINISTER. MISTER ZACCAGNINI IS EXPECTED TO REVEAL HIS PLANS IN HIS REPORT AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE CONGRESS.

ALL FACTIONS OF THE PARTY SAY THEY FAVOR REFORM. BUT AGREEMENT DISPERSES AS SOON AS SPECIFIC MEASURES ARE DISCUSSED. THERE IS STRONG PRESSURE FROM YOUNG CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS TO GET NEW FACES INTO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS -- AND SPECIFICALLY TO LIMIT THE LENGTH OF TIME AN INDIVIDUAL MAY FILL A PARTY OR GOVERNMENT POST. MOST TOP CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC LEADERS HAVE GROWN OLD IN A REVOLVING SERIES OF MINISTERIAL POSTS.

THERE IS ALSO A SERIOUS POLICY DISPUTE OVER THE PARTY'S RELATIONS WITH THE COMMUNISTS AND THE SOCIALISTS. SECRETARY ZACCAGNINI FAVORS WHAT IS CALLED "A COMPETITIVE DIALOGUE" WITH THE COMMUNISTS. HIS SUPPORTERS ARGUE THAT IT IS NOT REALISTIC TO REFUSE ANY SAY IN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS TO A PARTY WHICH POLLED THIRTY-THREE PERCENT OF THE VOTE.

THE CONSERVATIVES CHARGE THAT THE ZACCAGNINI POLICY IS LEADING PRECISELY TO COMMUNIST PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT. THEY FAVOR A RENEWAL OF THE ALLIANCE WITH THE SOCIALISTS -- THAT IS, RESURRECTION OF THE CENTER-LEFT COALITION. THE PROGRESSIVES SAY THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE PROVED THEMSELVES UNWILLING TO ACCEPT THE REFORMS THE SOCIALISTS DEMAND.

IF THERE IS ONE THING THAT ALL OBSERVERS AND PARTICIPANTS AGREE UPON, IT IS THAT THERE IS NO WAY OF KNOWING HOW THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY CONGRESS WILL TURN OUT. THE PARTY COULD TURN TOWARD SUBSTANTIVE REFORM. IT COULD CHOOSE TO CONTINUE DOWN THE SAME OLD PATH. OR IT COULD CONTINUE SITTING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CROSSROADS AT WHICH IT FINDS ITSELF TODAY.

JS/PBM